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ABSTRACT

Stylistics, the art of making effective choices in writing, depends on synonymy. This means that writers, depending on the purpose, the audience, and the context of their messages, will rephrase those messages to improve their effectiveness. Paraphrasing messages to fit the needs of particular situations depends on a number of stylistic variables and linguistic considerations. The stylistic variables include substitution of words and expressions, varying word order, changing mood, using positive/negative structures reciprocally, and varying sentence type. The linguistic considerations are semantic deep structures, surface meaning, syntactic transformations, phonological patterns, and discourse patterns. Examples showing how these variables and considerations affect the transmission of a message reveal that writers who practice and understand stylistic synonymy enjoy considerable choice and greater precision in the communication of their ideas. (RL)

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Synonymy as an Aspect of Rhetoric*

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Abstract

Stylistics, or the art of making effective choices in writing, depends on the notion of synonymy. That is, assuming that a writer has a particular message to communicate, he/she will make stylistic choices according to the purpose, the audience, and the context of the message. The rhetorical effectiveness of the message may well be determined by the stylistic choices made by the writer whether consciously or subconsciously, from native speaker intuition or from training and experience. The writer's ability to manipulate and control stylistic options among essentially synonymous utterances may determine his/her success in communicating a rhetorically effective message.

In this paper I demonstrate that control of stylistic synonymy is an integral component of rhetoric. Through paraphrasing I show that certain stylistic variables are available to the writer as native speaker that can be manipulated to the writer's advantage. Furthermore, I show that these variables are circumscribed by linguistic considerations. The variables I consider are: substitution of words and expressions, variation in word order, changing mood, reciprocal use of positive/negative structures, and variation in sentence type. The considerations are: semantic deep structures and surface meaning, syntactic transformations, and phonological and discourse patterns. These factors influence the acceptable degree of stylistic synonymy of a given expression for the writer's rhetorical purposes.

Synonymy as an Aspect of Rhetoric

One aspect of rhetoric is what I choose to call stylistic synonymy. In order to define this concept, I would like to briefly review the writing process from the moment of inspiration in a writer's mind. As the message forms and the writer feels a desire to communicate it, if the writer is perceptive and experienced (i.e. skilled), he/she will choose an appropriate style of writing for the target audience. Because this is true, Jimmy Carter, for instance, will never send a message to Menachem Begin which says:

1.1 Dammit! You've had your last shekel from me!

Instead, his message will read something like this:

1.2 My dear colleague, due to exigencies on our current fiscal reserves, my government feels we must reassess our ability to continue the outflow of resources vis-à-vis our several commitments.

Nevertheless, whether the style of the message is formal or informal, the message is the same, namely:

1.3 I won't send you more money.

In addition to varying the style of the message according to the audience, the writer will also vary it to account for the context in which the message will be conveyed and the purpose of the communication. I am not concerned in this paper, however, with these factors though they cannot be ignored and indeed will force their way into the discussion from time to time.

By the time a skilled writer begins the actual task of

writing, it is assumed that he/she will have researched, analyzed, synthesized and evaluated the material to be included in the message and will subsequently have organized it into logical units that will facilitate the comprehension of the reader. Ultimately, the message must be couched in a particular form that either works as effective rhetoric, or it doesn't. In other words, the writer has not completed the rhetorical process until the style of writing is of such a quality that nothing of the writer's message is lost and, ideally, it is enhanced.

Assuming then that the writer does not change the content of the message, the style of the message can indeed add to its effectiveness depending upon the writer's ability to choose well among essentially synonymous expressions of the message. Whether these choices are made consciously or subconsciously is beside the point. We cannot, for instance, determine the degree of consciousness with which writers such as Hemingway or Joyce accepted or rejected alternative expressions. Furthermore, it would be impossible to determine the particular forms of expression which writers reject--unless of course we were to run a continuous garbage search such as was done with Kissinger's waste paper. Yet, a writer's success may depend more on his/her skill in rejecting ineffective forms than on his/her profound thoughts. For instance, if Abraham Lincoln had said:

2.1 ...that the governance of people, the governing done by the people themselves, and the establishment of government for the people's benefit shall not perish from the earth.

we would not remember him as a great orator. Instead he chose to say:

2.2 ...that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.

We know, however, that theoretically the same choices were available to Hemingway and Joyce and Lincoln that are available to every native speaker of English. Yet we know that most writing is not stylistically effective.

Returning to the writing process for the moment, I want to remind you that writers pause many times as they write to search their minds-- their native speaker intuition, if you will-- for the right expression, that is, the one that sounds right. Even then, skilled writers revise many times. This process of writing and re-writing is a process of choice-making. The wadded papers in the waste basket represent the writer's rejections of options which he/she deems to be least effective for the purpose and the audience. This process of rejecting or accepting a particular form of an utterance involves paraphrasing, that is, changing the form of a message without changing the message itself. Assuming then that the writer does not change the message, the writer's

paraphrases are essentially synonymous forms, or what I choose to call stylistic synonymy.

The notion of stylistic synonymy needs to be differentiated from what we usually call synonymy, that is, a sort of strict synonymy. In strict synonymy, if two expressions have derived from the same semantic deep structure and have been subjected to minimal transformation and lexical change, we say they are synonymous-- even though this may be a notion that exists only in theory and is seriously questioned by linguists (see Chafe 1972). Nevertheless, most native speakers of English would accept male child as synonymous with son. That is to say, they mean the same thing.

In stylistic synonymy, on the other hand, if two expressions derived from the same deep structure are subjected to stylistic changes, such as lexical change, syntactic transformations, phonological processes, and contextual considerations, they will not be strictly synonymous, but sufficiently synonymous for at least some native speakers to attest to their synonymy. That is, the surface structure meaning in such a case is sufficiently synonymous with the deep structure meaning that the intended meaning is not lost and indeed may be enhanced. There is considerably more flexibility in stylistic synonymy than in strict synonymy. Sentences 1.1 - 1.3 demonstrate this rather well. Writing would be very dull if it were confined to strict synonymy. In fact, style would not exist as we know it, and there would be little scope for

affecting particular audiences in desired ways. Thus, the notion of stylistic synonymy is important to rhetoric.

To understand how stylistic synonymy works, we might think of it as a continuum between synonymy and nonsynonymy. Synonymous expressions must derive from a single semantic deep structure; nonsynonymous expressions clearly derive from different deep structures. There are potentially several surface forms derived from one deep structure in stylistic synonymy. Some of these will be nearer the notion of strict synonymy than others. The writer must decide whether a particular form is sufficiently synonymous with his/her intended meaning (i.e. semantic deep structure). At the same time, he/she must determine if that form will also be sufficiently meaningful to the target audience. The writer hopes, insofar as possible, to bring the reader's understanding of the message into focus with the intended meaning. I suggest that the farther from strict synonymy a particular form is, the less likely it is that the reader's understanding will coincide with the intended meaning. This is a risk the writer takes. Obviously, the skilled writer is better prepared to minimize this risk than the unskilled writer. In fact, the difference between effective writing and poor writing may well depend on the ability of the writer to control stylistically synonymous choices. It is these choices that I am concerned with in this paper. We cannot, of course, explore the psycholinguistic processes in the writer's mind, but

we can explore some of the stylistic options and the reasons why a writer may choose one option over another.

As the writer paraphrases, he/she is exercising stylistic options. These options operate at several levels-- from word to discourse. At every level there are certain limits beyond which the paraphrases will no longer be synonymous. To demonstrate this, I will consider several stylistic options at various levels and suggest certain considerations which may lead a writer to choose one form over another. The options I will consider-- and they certainly are not exhaustive-- are: substitution of words and expressions, variation in word order, changing mood, reciprocal use of positive/negative structures, and variation of sentence type (cf. Tufte, 1971). The considerations are: semantic deep structures and surface meaning, syntactic transformations, phonological and discourse patterns.

Lexical choice, then, represents one stylistic option. For example, the four words in 3.1 are not synonymous in the strict sense, yet there is sufficient overlapping of deep structure meaning to allow the writer to choose any one of them in certain contexts, such as 3.2.

3.1 priest minister clergyman pastor

3.2 The young Catholic priests were the worst of all.
clergymen
pastors
ministers

Although some native speakers might have a preference for the word priest, few would question the use of any of the four (except as a technical religious term). The sentence in 3.3, however, seems to be a similar message to 3.2, but the reciprocal substitution of the four words is limited because the functions of a Buddhist priest do not normally include the leading of a congregation, but rather relate to the ritual functions of the religion.

3.3 The young Buddhist priests were the worst of all.

clergymen

*pastors

*ministers

Thus, thesaurus entries notwithstanding, the acceptable choices among the four words for 3.3 are more restricted because the semantic deep structure of a Buddhist priest is different from that of a Catholic priest. Still, 3.2 and 3.3 are more amenable to stylistic synonymy that strict synonymy would allow.

The notion of connotation illustrates another type of meaning consideration. The similar content of 4.1 - 4.3 illustrates that connotative words can confer varying qualities on the stream. The writer may aim to affect the reader in particular ways by the choice of such words.

4.1 The crick gulped at the banks as it shoved its way along.

4.2 The stream eroded the banks as it flowed along.

4.3 The brook nibbled the banks as it glided along.

Connotation is a sociolinguistic function which native speakers are privy to. It affects lexical choice and surface meaning, but not deep structure semantics. Skilled writers, conscious of the nuances of the language can use connotative words to great advantage if they so choose.

Another stylistic option I want to consider is the variation afforded by the order of modifiers in relation to the word or structure modified. Single word modifiers exhibit the most resistance to extraposition in a sentence while adverbial phrases that modify the whole clause or sentence probably allow the most manipulation. The sentences in 5.1 - 5.4 demonstrate the global adverbial prepositional phrase where the stylistic synonymy is very close to strict synonymy.

5.1 In all parts of the world, children are told stories of their national heroes.

5.2 Children in all parts of the world are told stories of their national heroes.

5.3 Children are told, in all parts of the world, stories of their national heroes.

5.4 Children are told stories of their national heroes in all parts of the world.

There is no question that all of these are derived from the same deep structure. The reasons why the writer might choose one of these over another relate to the notions of thematization and

stress pattern which I will refer to later. In terms of stylistic synonymy, however, any of them is acceptable.

Noun modifiers, on the other hand, are more restricted in extraposition movement because they are readily susceptible to ambiguity if there is more than one noun phrase in a clause. In fact, some extraposition will cause noun modifiers to become clearly nonsynonymous. The participial clause in sentences 6.1 - 6.6 illustrate this well.

6.1 Standing at the edge of the jungle, John saw an elephant under a banana tree.

6.2 John, standing at the edge of the jungle, saw an elephant under a banana tree.

The sentences in 6.1 and 6.2 derive from the same deep structure and have undergone minimal transformation. The nonfinite clause clearly modifies John. However, in 6.3 the subject of the nonfinite clause may be either John or elephant; hence, it is ambiguous and represents two possible deep structures.

6.3 John saw, standing at the edge of the jungle, an elephant under a banana tree.

On the continuum between synonymy and nonsynonymy, ambiguity is one of the choices. I say 'choice' because a skilled writer may deliberately exercise this option to enhance his/her writing with several layers of meaning. Ambiguity from unskilled writers is unintentional and not a matter of choice.

Further movement of the nonfinite clause, as in 6.4 and 6.5 demonstrates the limitation of extraposition. Here, the extraposition is clearly meaning-changing, and the sentences in 6.4 and 6.5 have been derived from two different semantic deep structures which are both different from that in 6.1 and 6.2.

6.4 John saw an elephant standing at the edge of the jungle under a banana tree.

6.5 John saw an elephant under a banana tree standing at the edge of the jungle.

The sentence in 6.6, however, is again ambiguous in the same two ways as 6.3 because the clause is nonrestrictive (as in 6.1 and 6.2) with the juncture indicated by the comma, a structure which differentiates it from the deep structure meaning of 6.5.

6.6 John saw an elephant under a banana tree, standing at the edge of the jungle.

The stylistic synonymy in this set of sentences is limited by semantic deep structure and syntactic rules governing extraposition transformations.

The negative transformation is another stylistic option. Even though the message is written, rather than spoken, it seems to have phonological implications. In fact, both juncture and stress appear to be functioning in 7.1 and 7.2. For instance, 7.1 lacks the force of 7.2, its negative form. For this reason, we are inclined to use an exclamation point with 7.2, but not with 7.1.

7.1 Fire when you see the whites of their eyes.

7.2 Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes!

I suggest that, even though we have accepted the notion that there are differences between spoken and written language, in terms of stylistic synonymy there is considerable research needed yet. This need will, perhaps, be more emphatic as I consider the notion of information focus later in this paper.

One of the most productive linguistic options in recursive grammar is the structure of the sentence itself which allows many stylistic forms. A writer can add interest to a piece of writing just by combining several simple sentences into compound and complex sentences, and by clause reduction and deletion, we can form rather complex simple sentences. For instance, sentences 8.2 - 8.6 are paraphrases of the sentences in 8.1. All these sentences have the same semantic deep structure, and the subtle differences in surface meaning relate entirely to the particular stylistic form. Still these sentences do not exhaust the stylistically synonymous forms possible from the sentences in 8.1.

8.1 Jeremy loved a Japanese girl.
She was very traditional.
She lowered her eyes.
She talked softly to him.

8.2 Jeremy loved a Japanese girl who in the traditional manner lowered her eyes and talked softly to him.

8.3 Being very traditional, the Japanese girl that Jeremy loved lowered her eyes and talked softly to him.

8.4 Because she was very traditional, the Japanese girl loved by Jeremy talked softly to him with lowered eyes.

8.5 Jeremy loved a Japanese girl, and she, being traditional, talked softly to him while lowering her eyes.

8.6 Her eyes were lowered as she talked softly to him, this very traditional girl loved by Jeremy.

The writer must decide which among these stylistically synonymous sentences will be the most effective for his/her purposes and audience whether he/she paraphrases the message in writing or only processes them mentally. In fact, in any piece of writing, the writer must continually judge among alternatives as they relate to his/her discourse. In the case of the sentences in 8, although the writer must consider the variations in terms of synonymy, his/her major consideration will be discoursal.

At the discourse level, the stylistic options are more complex because the writer's intended meaning must be consistent and effective across sentence boundaries, and the writer must account for such things as contextual reference (e.g. deixis, pronoun reference). Furthermore, the discourse pattern of English will influence both the writer's writing and the reader's understanding of the writing. That is, because of the redundancy of normal English discourse pattern, the reader has certain expectations which facilitate the

the reading process. If the writer violates these expectations by deviating from the normal discourse pattern, he/she risks disrupting the reader's continuity of thought and even understanding. The skilled writer may, however, use deviation from the pattern to great advantage. Here I want to consider two elements of discourse pattern as they relate to stylistic synonymy: thematization and information focus (Halliday, 1968; Kress, 1976).

English discourse pattern places the theme, or that which the writer is talking about, at the beginning of the clause. Normally, the theme is the subject of the clause or it is the wh- element, if there is one at the beginning of the clause. The remainder of the clause constitutes what the writer is saying about the theme. Certain stylistic options may be exercised in order to retain the normal discourse pattern. The passive construction is one of these. In sentence 9.1, the theme is Symphony. In contrast, the passive form of 9.1 has concert as the theme.

9.1 The Civic Symphony gave a brown bag concert last week.

9.2 A brown bag concert was given by the Civic Symphony last week.

The sentences in 8.2 and 8.3 illustrate another instance where the choice of theme may influence the choice of sentence structure.

Concomitant with the notion of thematization, and interdependent with it, is phonological stress, or information focus. Thematization occurs in the writer's mind before he/she transforms

the deep structure, and the information focus is determined at this point. The actual phonological stress, on the other hand, is applied at the surface level, and of course, is only a function of spoken language. Nevertheless, the information focus will affect the written form of the language as well. Furthermore, it may affect surface meaning and style. This is true because, normally, the writer begins a clause with information which he/she believes is known also to the reader. This is so-called old information. The new information normally appears later in the clause at the point of emphasis. Although we cannot indicate phonological stress in writing (except by using italics or underlining), we can structure our written sentences to reflect the normal stress pattern of speech, and it is often advisable to do so to fit the reader's expectations. The pairs of sentences in 10 demonstrate how sentence structure (as in the second sentence of each pair) reflects normal discourse stress pattern which can only be indicated to the reader (in the first of each pair of sentences) by italics (or small capitals in this text).

10.1 The cost of living rose drastically last year.

The cost of living rose drastically last year.

10.2 The cost of living rose drastically last year.

It was the cost of living that rose drastically last year.

10.3 The cost of living rose drastically last year.

The cost of living didn't decrease last year; it rose.

10.4 The cost of living rose drastically last year.

It was last year that the cost of living rose drastically.

Although a skilled writer may be able to violate normal stress patterns successfully, the structure of the language is such that within stylistic synonymy there is an option available which allows the writer to avoid the risk.

Stylistic synonymy, then, is an aspect of rhetoric. The rhetorical process may well depend on the writer's ability to convey the intended message in a stylistically effective form. The choice of that form depends on the continued judgment of the writer among essentially synonymous forms, or stylistic synonymy. Stylistic synonymy is a pragmatic notion which is dynamic, that is, ever-changing depending on the writer's use of every aspect of language. The writer must work within the limitations of the grammar of the language and must consider the effects of the semantic, syntactic, and phonological components of the language on every sentence he/she writes. Nevertheless, the language allows the writer considerable choice and great precision in communicating a message to a particular audience for a particular purpose in a particular context. There remains considerably more investigation to be done regarding the interrelationships of language components and style. The notion of stylistic synonymy could be the focal point for such investigation.

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